

An Evening with Charley

In February, I brought readers of this column to one of my favorite places at one of my favorite times, a remote beaver pond on a starlit winter's night. On the night in question, I was delivering supplemental food to a young beaver via a pipe I had inserted through the top of the lodge. The beaver kit had been born late in the season and was unlikely to survive without this help.

Now, as August turns to September, I invite you to join me on the shores of a small pond just upstream from that winter pond. Our vantage is a grassy opening next to a stonewall, and from here we can see much of the pond. The beavers' new lodge is forty feet away, and when we arrive just before dusk, we can hear a gurgle as a beaver plunges from the living chamber into the water. Its wake carves an arc toward our seat on the shore, and as the beaver beaches in the shallow water, I recognize that kit from winter, Charley, now a yearling. He pauses to sniff the air and listen for danger. After satisfying himself that the coast is clear, he waddles eagerly up to where I have laid out his picnic and flops down to enjoy a few of the nutritious nuggets.

We enjoy the sounds and sights of evening—a lingering firefly, the croak of a green frog, the haunting songs of hermit thrushes. . . . As the light fades, there is another splash and then a few eager squeaks as a truly tiny beaver paddles over. This little kit docks at some striped maple branches in the water and, with her tail curled up out of the water for balance, she begins deftly rolling the leaves and feeding them between her chopping incisors. She is one of Charley's summer projects, for as is customary among the beavers of this watershed, the yearlings are responsible for babysitting while the young kits are still in the lodge.

Raising the next generation is very

important for the beavers involved, but it is also important to every other organism in this watershed. By creating and then abandoning ponds along the course of a stream, beavers create a tapestry of different habitats, from ponds to marshes to meadows, that host a suite of plants and animals not found in the surrounding forest. Many forest creatures also make use of these wetland habitats. Such benefits are easy to observe. Less visible is the way beavers hold water on the landscape by slowing its journey downstream. The presence of beavers can make intermittent streams flow year round. Further, the accumulation of sediment and peat moss in beaver ponds leads to the development of deep deposits of organic soils that retain moisture like a sponge. These same deposits create wider floodplains that dramatically reduce the energy of floodwaters. As climate change increases the intensity of both droughts and floods, the contributions of beavers are being celebrated, most visibly in the arid parts of the West where beavers have restored barren landscapes to lush productivity.

This has been the week in which Hurricane Harvey delivered a record rainfall to parts South. Many have pointed to the ways in which unfettered development and paving have exacerbated the damage of the storm. Is it too much to hope that humanity will learn from such catastrophic events? If not, I am sitting with a very handsome little hydrological engineer who would be happy to provide some instruction.



Dew & Charley